

“The Pauline Conception of Redemption”
The Bible Student 5:51-58. [1902]

In a previous number of *The Bible Student* we examined the Pauline conception of reconciliation, which we found to belong to the military sphere, its result being conceived by the apostle as peace. The conception now before us belongs to the commercial sphere. Of course, underneath both lies the more fundamental forensic mode of viewing the work of Christ, which corresponds to the Pauline idea of righteousness. It will be most correct, therefore, to speak of the military-forensic and the commercial-forensic representations given by the apostle of Christ's objective saving work. We must remember that in the ancient world reduction to slavery as a consequence of guilt or debt was quite common.

The terms which Paul uses to describe this redemptive aspect of the atonement are the following: (1) The verb *λυτρον* with its derivations found in Romans 3:24; 8:23; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 1:7, 14, 4:30; Colossians 1:14; 1 Timothy 2:6; Titus 2:14. (2) The verb *αγοραζειν* and its compound *εξαγοραζειν* in 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; Galatians 3:13; 4:6. (3) The verb *περιποιεσθαι* in Acts 20:28. All these terms, especially the first mentioned, have their source in the Old Testament. *Λυτρον*, “ransom,” is the Septuagint rendering for a number of Hebrew words signifying the value paid to deliver a captive or a person liable to legal punishment. The Old Testament already transfers this idea to the religious sphere and speaks of Jehovah as ransoming or redeeming His people, the two chief Hebrew words for this being *גָּאָל* and *פָּדָה*. As a rule, however, when using this representation, with Jehovah as the subject of the act, it does not reflect upon the idea that any price is paid for the deliverance of Israel.¹ The point of comparison, which determines the choice of the figure, lies rather in this, that Israel is in virtue of the covenant the property of Jehovah, so that every act of deliverance assumes the character of an act whereby He reacquires His original possession.² Undoubtedly this idea explains why the Old Testament employs the terms mentioned in preference to other words descriptive of deliverance in general. Of course, there are passages in which this thought need not have been consciously present to the mind of the writer, i.e., where “to redeem” or “to ransom” may have acquired the general sense of “to deliver.” But in such passages as Deuteronomy 9:26; 2 Samuel 7:23; Isaiah 52:3, the original conception is easily recognized. Further, it should be observed that in the Old Testament the idea of redemption is employed throughout in the national, political sense. God redeems Israel from the bondage to which her enemies have reduced her. In an indirect, typical way only, is the principle of the spiritual redemption of the people of God exhibited. Besides Psalm 130:8, “And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities,” there is no Old Testament passage in which the spiritual idea involved finds direct expression.

In some instances Paul closely attaches himself to the Old Testament conception of the word. There is a well-defined eschatological usage of the term “redemption” in his epistles, which has associated with it the thought that God will in the last day recover what is originally or in principle his own. Thus in Romans 8:23 the apostle speaks of “the redemption of the body” as an act of adoption, i.e., he recognizes in it that logical result of the relation of sonship in which the believer stands to God. Perhaps in 1 Corinthians 1:30 also, where it is coordinated with “righteousness” and “sanctification,” the word “redemption” describes the final step in this process of subjective salvation. But especially in two passages of the epistle to the Ephesians do we find an exact reproduction of the Old Testament idea. In 1:14 the Holy Spirit appears as the earnest of our inheritance, which earnest is given with

a view to the redemption of God's own possession. And in 4:30 the readers are said to have been sealed in the Holy Spirit of God unto the day of redemption. The Holy Spirit marks them as God's property, which he will reclaim at the end.

It is not possible to determine whether in the instances quoted the apostle, besides implying the notion of "recovery," also means to imply the further thought that this recovery rests on the legal basis of the payment of a ransom price. In the other passages, however, the context shows that this latter thought was not only in his mind, but formed the center of the conception. The only question is to what extent he means to press the comparison from this point of view. To say that Christians have been delivered for a price may express no more than that their deliverance involved great expense to God, and there need be no reflection in it upon the further truth that God in a different relation was also the one who had to exact this ransom and to whom it was actually paid. This seems to be the case in 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23. Here Paul simply emphasizes that, inasmuch as God has bought the believer for Himself and that at great cost, He is entitled to a proportionate return of service and obedience on the believer's part. Here to inquire for the person to whom the ransom was paid would carry us beyond the scope of the apostle's intention. Elsewhere, however, he uses the figure in such a connection that we should miss the very point of his statement, were we to leave this latter element out of consideration. According to Galatians 3:13, "Christ bought us free from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." Here the participial clause explains how the redemption took place. Christ paid by letting Himself be made a curse. The implication is that the same curse to which we were exposed was borne by Christ, and this further involves that the price paid by Christ was paid to the same power to which we were criminally indebted, viz., to the law. And, inasmuch as God stands back of the law, the inference is inevitable that to Paul the crucifixion meant the payment of the price to God, in order that we might be freed from the payment of the same price in our own persons.

But against this interpretation of the apostle's train of thought various objections are raised. It is said that Paul does not declare Christ to have become "*the* curse," i.e., the definite curse of the law resting on sinners, but simply "*a* curse." And further it is said that the sequel proves the correctness of the significance thus attached to the absence of the article. For here Paul so represents it that Christ became cursed because he was hung upon the tree, whereas, according to the common interpretation, he was hung upon the tree because he was accursed. In other words, Paul stops short of representing the death of Christ as bearing a penal character in the intention of God and for Christ's own consciousness.³ These two arguments, however, cannot disprove the identity of the curse of Christ with our curse. That the absence of the article does not compel us to think of another curse than that of the law may be seen from verse 10: "As many as are from works of law are under *a* curse." Paul omitted the article, in both verse 10 and verse 13, because he wished to use the word "curse" in its abstract qualitative sense. The other difficulty also easily resolves itself. The quotation from Deuteronomy 21:23 is not intended to give the *actual* ground why Christ became a curse, but only the ground on which it can be *affirmed* that He became a curse. The actual ground was Christ's vicarious exposure to the condemnation of the law. While, therefore, these objections carry no weight, the whole structure of the sentence, here as well as in 2 Corinthians 5:21, emphasizes the identity of the curse under which we stood and that under which Christ came to stand. The substantive form of the statement, "a curse" rather than "accursed," expresses most fully the identification of our Lord with the punishment for sin. Not because Paul wished to weaken or

qualify the statement, but because he wished to strengthen and generalize it, did he choose the noun instead of the adjective.⁴ Moreover, the quotation from Deuteronomy proves that he was ready to apply the adjective to Christ.

Ritschl has attempted in yet a different way to relieve the harshness of the expression. He thinks Paul distinguished between the curse of the law and the curse of God, and appeals to verse 19 in proof of this distinction. But, although the law is here said to have been ordained through angels, this by no means alters the fact that God is its ultimate source.⁵ Besides this, the agency of the angels in the original promulgation of the law does not involve that they are also the agents for enforcing it, i.e., the originators of the curse. There is no evidence that Paul held this view of the curse of the law as mediated by angelic powers. In the few passages where he seems to teach that superhuman spirits were concerned in the crucifixion of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:8, 9; Colossians 2:15), these figure not as representatives or agents of God, but as adversaries of God as well as of Christ. These passages, therefore, throw no light on the problem and do not admit of combination with Galatians 3:13, 19. Ritschl's interpretation of "the rudiments of the world" as referring to angels in 4:3, 9 is too precarious to justify the conclusion that Paul made angels the ultimate source of the curse of the law in distinction from God.

There is still another consideration by which Ritschl has attempted to break the force of the apostle's statement. He maintains that the pronoun "us" refers to the Jews exclusively and stands in pointed contrast to the word "Gentiles" in verse 14. Christ redeemed the Jews from the curse of the law, that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus. If this were correct, then the redemptive transaction would after all be but a procedure by which God freed the Jews from a curse resting upon them alone, and would not have the significance of a comprehensive atonement necessary to salvation as such. But this restriction cannot be allowed. On such a view the teleological connection between the removal of the curse and the coming of the blessing upon the Gentiles remains entirely unexplained. This connection becomes clear only when "us" is understood comprehensively of both Gentiles and Jews. The epistle to the Romans shows that Paul considered the Gentiles equally as much subject to the divine wrath as the Jews. Though the law had not been revealed to them in its explicit Jewish form, nevertheless they were virtually under its curse and had to be redeemed from this before the blessing could come to them.⁶

In the remaining passage of the epistle to the Galatians where the same figure occurs (4:5), the implications are somewhat different. Here it is not the curse of the law from which freedom is secured by the payment of the ransom, but the obligation to fulfill the law in its ceremonial aspect. The leaders had been slaves under these "rudiments of the world." The work of Christ delivered them from this bondage and gave them the status of sonship. His work was therefore a ransom which bought them their freedom from observance of the ceremonial system. This also, however, did not apply to the Jews exclusively, for according to verses 8 and 9 there was a sense in which the Gentiles also had stood under the "rudiments of the world." Now, if it be not merely freedom from the curse of the law, but freedom from the obligation to keep this law, that Christ has bought, then the price paid by Him will have been conceived by Paul in accordance with this purpose as consisting not merely in His death, but as involving also His subjection to the ceremonial ordinances of the law. And this is confirmed by the apostle's statement that Christ was made of a woman, *made under the law*. These last words must refer to something coinciding with His birth. His life of obedience to the

law is the ransom Paul has in view. The principle of His active obedience is here actually enunciated, although this active obedience as here defined does not quite cover the range of the active obedience of the Mediator as defined in our dogmatic theology. It refers specifically to the ceremonial law as such, whence the positive counterpart of the slavery abolished is sonship rather than life.⁷ The objection has been brought to the view here taken, that Christ's obedience to the ceremonial law did not begin with His birth. This objection lacks force for two reasons: (1) Paul could conceive of the birth of Christ as the natural introduction into the life of obedience; in virtue of His Jewish birth He was under the law, i.e., obliged to fulfill it as soon as He became capable of doing so. (2) The law imposes obligations even upon infants, e.g., circumcision, so that a state of subjection to it may be said to have begun with the birth of Christ.

In the light of the unambiguous passages already discussed we are now prepared to understand those more general statements in which the idea of redemption is associated with justification and propitiation (Romans 3:24, 25) or with forgiveness and grace (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). The use of such forensic terms with reference to the result of the redemption proves once more that the justice of God was concerned in the transaction, that in its ultimate analysis the ransom was a ransom paid to God, and the deliverance secured a deliverance especially from the bondage of guilt.⁸ It is true that thus a peculiar situation results: the Person from whom the sinner is bought, the Person who buys him, and the Person for whom he is bought are the same. But this need not stagger us. If Paul, as we have seen in a preceding article, was able to conceive of God in the process of reconciliation as sustaining towards the sinner and towards Christ simultaneously this twofold relation of love and wrath, then there is no reason to doubt that he could also ascribe to God in the process of redemption the threefold relationship above formulated. He bought us for Himself with reference to His love; He bought us through Himself, viz., in Christ; He bought us from Himself with reference to his justice or wrath.

Finally, it should be observed that in 1 Timothy 2:6 the vicarious character of the redemptive transaction has found unequivocal expression in the use of the prepositive *ἑαυτοῦ*, "who gave himself *ἑαυτοῦ* for all."

(Footnotes)

¹ According to Exodus 30:12, the individual Israelites must ransom themselves by paying a fixed sum of money to Jehovah. Cf. also Isaiah 43:3 and, on the other hand, 52:3.

² Hence the Septuagint renders these verbs by *λυτροῦσθαι* in the middle voice, "to redeem for one's self." The active voice *λυτροῦν* signifies "to sell, let go free for a ransom" (cf. Titus 2:14).

³ So Stevens, *The Theology of the N.T.*, p. 411.

⁴ In the passage from Corinthians Paul probably had an additional motive for avoiding the expression that Christ became "a sinner" or "sinful" for us. These expressions would have been liable to misinterpretation, because sin is a subjective condition as well as an objective status. But no such ambiguity could attach to the affirmation that Christ became "accursed." A curse is always an objective relation. Hence Paul's sole motive in using the noun must have been to strengthen the statement.

⁵ Notice Paul says *δι' ἀγγελῶν*, not *ὑπ' ἀγγελῶν*.

⁶ Attention has been called to the abbreviated form in which Paul quotes the words from Deuteronomy. In the Hebrew text (as also in the Septuagint) the statement reads: "for every one that hangeth on a tree is accursed of God." Paul omits the words "of God." It is asserted that this omission must be intentional and significant. But obviously Paul quotes only so much as was strictly essential for establishing the point in question. This

was the fact of the curse as such. On this and not on that it was a curse of God lies the main emphasis in the connection. But, although the emphasis does not rest on the divine source of the curse, we have no right to say that Paul denied this source and for that reason abbreviated the original text.

⁷ Elsewhere Paul speaks of the active obedience in its wider sense, e.g., Romans 5:17, 18.

⁸ Only in Titus 2:4, "Who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession," the reference seems to be rather to the bondage of corruption than to the bondage of guilt, although the latter need not be entirely excluded even here.